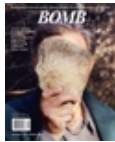


# THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

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Jimmie Durham  
by Manuel Cirauqui  
IN THE CURRENT ISSUE, ART

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Still life with Spirit and Xitle, 2007, site-specific installation, Basalt stone, 1992 Chrysler automobile Spirit, acrylic paint. Courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

I met Jimmie Durham the day after the opening of his retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in February of 2009. At that time I was working on a project entitled *An Inquiry on Chaos*, a series of conversations, workshops, and artist collaborations envisioned as an architecture of documents and a collective essay. The presence of Jimmie Durham in the project seemed imperative, given that throughout the years his artmaking has been guided, with a sort of erratic obstinacy, by an unnamed chaotic principle.

Durham's artistic research, as he has sometimes stated, resides in the idea that something happens "away from language." This may add some extra relevance to his words, as if they were the threshold of that irreducible gap. In many of his performances—a good deal of which he has documented on video—stones seem to be the medium, or rather, the tool, for the restoration of a formless, scattered reality. His sculptures, made out of animal skulls, recycled PVC pipes decorated with feathers, tortured furniture, and, of course, found stones (to name just a few of their varied components), are iconic fragments of a continuous ritual of

disbelief merging with everyday life in search of a skeptical enchantment. Degraded readymades evoking global wastelands; object-poems adorned with capricious inscriptions, tags, and scars; spurious shrines or pieces of shrines as totems of a nomadic self constitute, in sum, *meaningful* garbage, sometimes even charged with talismanic power. Durham—a stateless activist born in a Cherokee community in Washington, Arkansas, in 1940—abandoned his activity as a leader of the American Indian Movement in the late 1970s, yet an important political remnant pervades his art. His *ars poetica* could be thought of as a now careful, now blind policy of laissez-faire—or anarchy—applied to found materials. He once expressed his credo with a triad: “against architecture, against narration, against structure.”

On that morning in February, I crossed the museum hall and saw, presiding over the exhibition’s entrance, the intimidating volume of an airplane smashed by a huge rock. The piece was theatrical, as the stone seemed almost inevitably fake. It was like an epigraph, a quote from his own declaration of principles. I had seen the entire show the day before, along with a brief performance during which Durham threw a cobblestone at a glass showcase. Betraying the laws of ordinary physics, the cobblestone—allegedly taken from the house of the medieval French poet, wanderer, and thief François Villon—broke the glass neither the first nor the second time it was thrown. It rather acted like a die, stubbornly hitting the improbable number, and Durham seemed to enjoy the process. That failure, I thought, was a perfect starting point for a discussion on interruption and improbability.

Durham and I talked over breakfast at the museum’s café. His speech was slow and broken somehow; he used an often twisted English grammar that had a mix of distance and camaraderie. Just as his writing, his speech was subtle and elusive and yet, at the same time, had a stone-brutal aversion to euphemism. It does not seem coincidental that in the last months Durham has refused to give interviews, taking a break from public speech and letting the works exist by themselves.

Releasing this interview now seems as timely as ever. During the nearly three years it has remained unpublished, I have seen new works and exhibitions by Durham across the globe, including a massive contribution to the project *Dominó Caníbal* in Murcia, Spain; his intervention at the 29th Biennial of São Paulo; and, more recently, his solo show at The Artist’s Institute in New York. The latter will be running through January 15, 2012, presenting one work at a time. Dedicated to reflecting on Durham’s work for six months, and foreshadowing his participation in Documenta 13, this show began with the series of videos *Collected Stones* (2002) which document operations using handheld stones, massive rocks, and pebbles, and whose results included the destruction of a TV set and the famous fridge-torture session. Think ripple effect—all of these events will certainly keep us thinking of Jimmie Durham and his bumpy, saturated silence.

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**MANUEL CIRAUQUI** So, tell me about your relationship to chaos. I suspect you must be dealing with this concept quite regularly, as it seems to occur often in your works. In many of them, you provoke things to get out of, say, the peaceful path of their becoming—in other words, you trigger an entropic process which entails a loss of form (I don’t want to call it destruction). It is as if you prompted or negotiated the passing of things toward a chaotic state: the showcase that breaks, the toy boat that sinks, and also the sudden, almost spontaneous association of tools, materials, props, clothes, etcetera, to make new objects. Do you deal with chaos as a working principle?

**JIMMIE DURHAM** You think that I do, but I never think of chaos, except that I read mathematical theory. I’m reading math all the time because I’ve got no concept of math. And I’m just trying to understand it a little bit, but it doesn’t work. I like interruptions, of any kind, especially from my own life, because we have such a tendency—something stronger than a tendency, actually—to do the same things all the time. (*Pauses as chairs are moved noisily in the background.*) Kierkegaard wrote about repetition as the greatest human good, because it was

close to holiness. Yet to me it is so strange that I do the same thing over and over, that I take the same route to the grocery store or when I walk home—it's intolerable. I want interruptions, I want things to be different all the time.

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